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### India

“Middle class, moral vacuum”

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A New Delhi couple alleged to have grossly mistreated their teenaged servant have become hated figures in India's media, but their behaviour is common. Not all middle-class Indians treat their maids as atrociously as alleged in this case, but in too many cases, the difference is only in the details.

According to police, the two New Delhi doctors forced the girl, 13, to slave from morning till night, gave her just two very meager meals a day and warned that if she ate anything from the kitchen in their absence, the “crime” would be observed on closed-circuit TV cameras. They then flew off for a jolly vacation in Bangkok, leaving the child alone, locked in with only enough provisions for a few days.

On the fourth day, maddened by hunger and loneliness, she went out onto the balcony and screamed for help. Neighbours called the police and the girl was taken into care, while the two doctors were arrested while trying to avoid detection after returning from Thailand. Their lawyer denied that the girl was abused, locked in or watched with cameras, and said the couple had been told she was 18. Meanwhile, relatives leapt to the couple's defense, claiming they treated the girl like their “own daughter.”

Whatever the truth about her circumstances, it's doubtful she was treated like a daughter. But worse than this casual misuse of words is the scornful way many servants are treated by India's newly enriched middle class.

Although it is against the law, children under 14 are employed in many such homes. They are chosen because they won't demand better pay or conditions, and because they don't answer back.

The self-serving rationalization often given is that at least these servants get three square meals, unlike the poverty-stricken conditions in their former rural homes. As though that compensates for the humiliations, such as being forced to stand (yes, stand) unfed beside a restaurant table while the family tucks into dinner, as young nannies often are. Or the hurt that's felt when an employer lovingly buys an ice cream for his son, but not for the attendant boy-servant.

It is a grotesque feature of many such families to treat the poor as subhuman, simply because they are poor. When a caring employer who treats his staff in a human way is encountered, the reaction is always that this misguided idiot is “spoiling” them.

What is missing is the notion that these young workers are doing a job like any other – a contract, with terms and conditions and mutual responsibilities. Instead of work, these families want servitude. Instead of professionalism, they want subservience. And the government abets this attitude by not regulating domestic work in the same way that it regulates other forms of labour.

Unicef says there are 35 million child labourers in India. The law prohibits children under 14 from working as domestic servants, but a Save the Children India survey found 50,000 in Calcutta alone; the organization says there could be as many as three million across the country.

Treating a child with such callousness can only happen where there is a moral vacuum. This vacuum distinguishes India from many other countries, where middle classes have historically provided moral leadership, set standards, propounded the ideals to which societies should aspire.

In its selfishness, India's bourgeoisie is a class apart, concerned only with its own interests. Wider issues, such as what happens to the less fortunate, are not considered. Perhaps if this couple is found guilty, they will be punished harshly and made an example of.

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